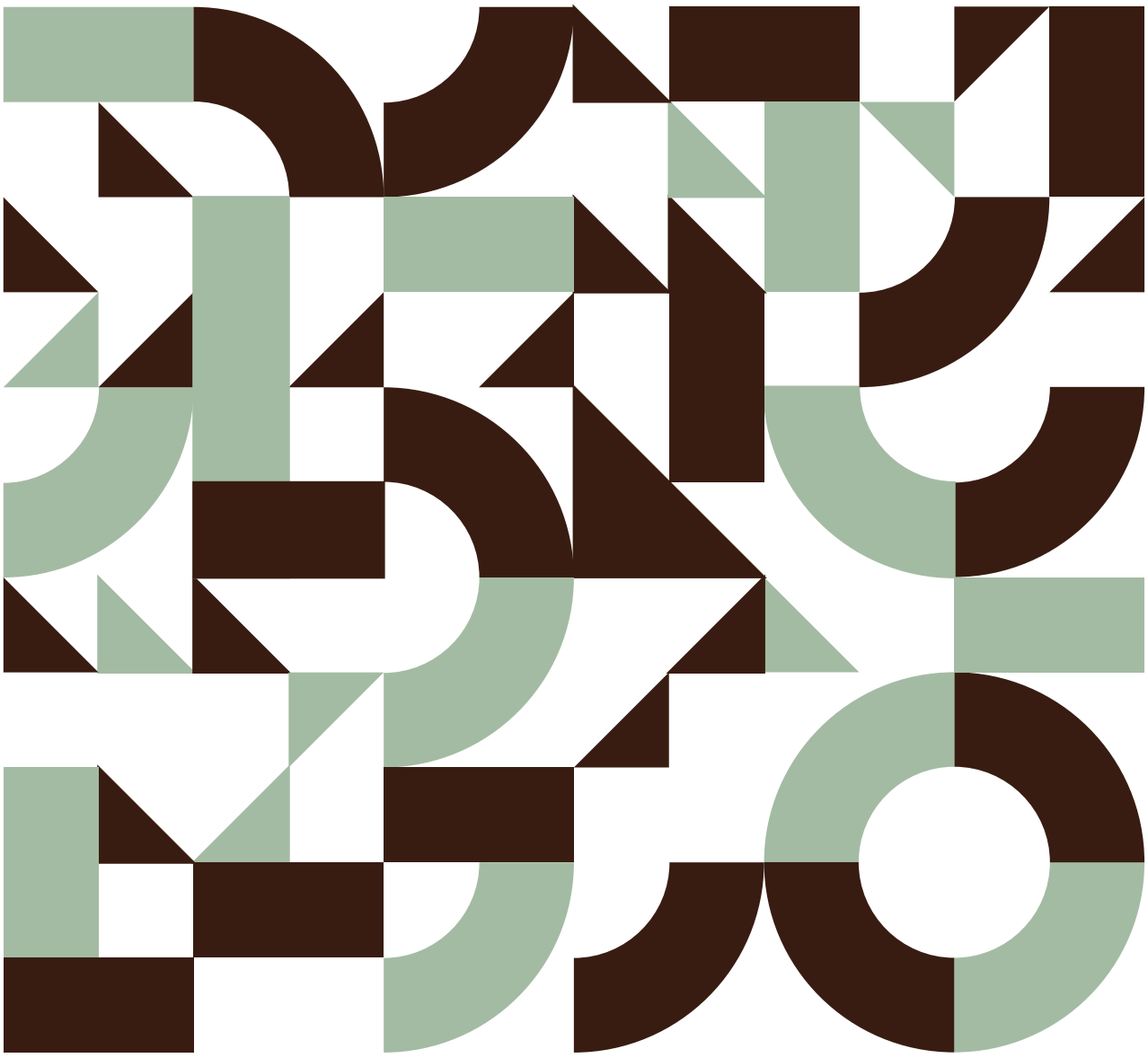
Iraq and Syria: Kurdish Autonomous Regions Under Threat



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Iraq and Syria: Kurdish Autonomous Regions Under Threat

FABRICE BALANCHE • LECTURER
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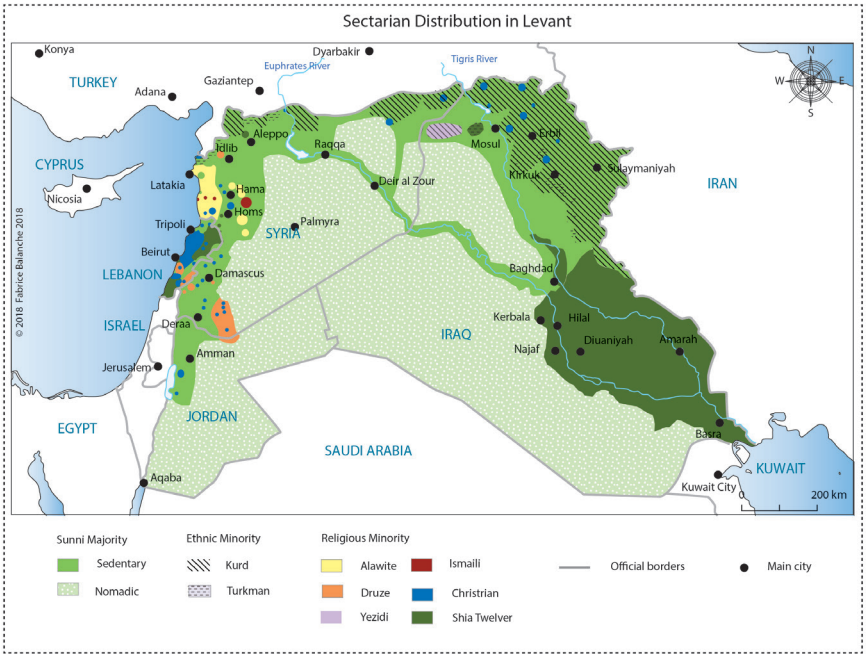
In November of 2022, Turkey bombed Kurdish forces in Syria and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) in Northern Iraq in retaliation for the attack in Istanbul that the Turkish president, Recep Tayeb Erdogan, attributed to the PKK. Turkey declared its intention to launch a major ground offensive against the Syrian Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria (AANES). At the same time, Iranian missiles were fired at the headquarters of Iran's opposition party which is in exile in Iraqi Kurdistan. In December 2022, during the official visit to Tehran by Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Soudani, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, also threatened to launch an offensive against the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) if the Iraqi government did not improve its control over the border with Iran.[1] The Iranian regime claims that the Kurds, and more particularly the Kurdish refugees in Iraq, are responsible for the anti-regime demonstrations that have swept Iran since the murder of the young Kurdish woman, Mahsa Amini, by the religious police. The simultaneous actions by Turkey and Iran against Kurds in Syria and Iraq attest to a common desire to curtail, or even eliminate, their autonomy. Both countries have large Kurdish minorities (20% in Turkey and 10% in Iran) and they have no desire to see these minorities claim autonomy as well.

It must be pointed out that the Kurds succeeded in freeing themselves from the control of central governments as a result of these governments being weakened and the support of the United States. Iraqi Kurdistan freed itself from Saddam Hussein's regime in 1991 as a result of the first Gulf War which saw the creation of a no-fly zone by the United States, France, and Great Britain. This saved the Kurds from being massacred and allowed for the creation of a fledgling state. The invasion of Iraq by the United Stated in 2003 enshrined their independent status in the 2004 Iraqi constitution. In Syria, the Kurds freed themselves from the Ba'athist regime's grip in 2012 when it abandoned most of its positions in Northern Syria. The Kurdish militia of the YPG, the Syrian branch of the PKK, has taken control of Kurdish territories. The support of the international coalition against Daesh allowed the YPG, starting in 2014, to establish itself in the northeast and create a fledgling state: the «Rojava», which is now the AANES. But the geopolitical conditions that allowed these two Kurdish entities to emerge are being challenged by the United States' disinterest in the region, the

1 — "Khamenei urges Iraqi PM to stand up to common 'enemies'", al-Monitor, 29 novembre 2022.

defeat of the Islamic State, the reassertion of central governments supported by their allies, and Turkey's neo-Ottoman strategy. Following decades of wars and crises, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq are now a geopolitical buffer zone characterized by the return of the Ottoman, Persian, and Russian Empires, to the detriment of the West and its allies. Both Kurdish entities in Syria and Iraq are considered as such by America's rivals.



MAP 1: COMMUNITY DISTRIBUTION OF THE LEVANT

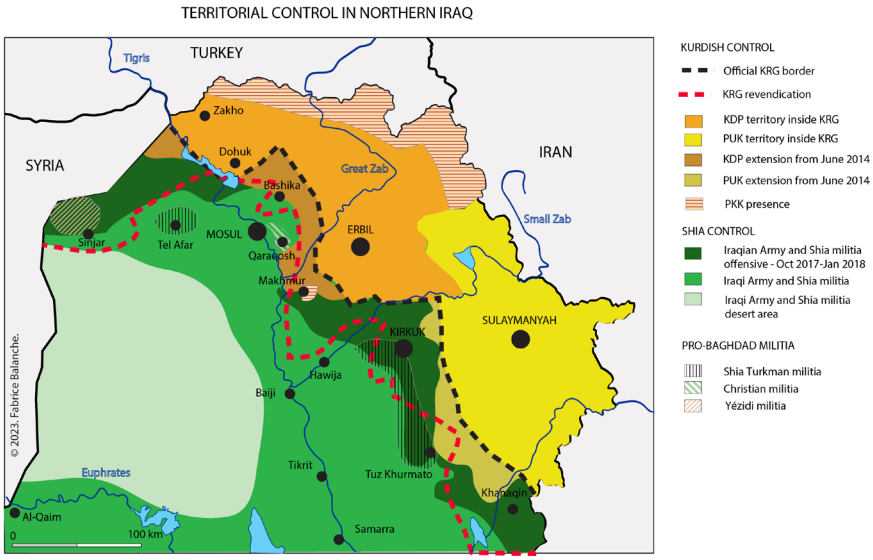
1. Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan: two distinct paths to autonomy

The two autonomous Kurdish regions were born and developed in a context of civil war and American intervention. The KRG was born in 1991 and was built around a prolonged armed resistance to the Iraqi government. The AANES, meanwhile, is more recent, having emerged in 2012 under the name of Rojava. In Syria, the Kurdish nationalist movement was much weaker than in Iraq; it never challenged the Syrian regime with weapons until 2012. The histories of Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan are therefore very different, but so are their geography, population, resources, and governance, which should be looked at again to understand their current geopolitical situation.

1.1 Iraqi Kurdistan: autonomy acquired through a long struggle and rooted in the land

The KRG numbers 6.2 million inhabitants, of which 80% are Kurds. It is spread over 38,000 km2, making it a bit smaller than Switzerland. It claims another 45,000 km2 (Sinjar, the Nineveh Plains, Kirkuk, etc.) which make up the so-called «disputed territories». Since recapturing territory from Daesh in 2017 and the offensive of Shiite militias against the KRG in 2018, these areas have largely been under the control of the Iraqi Armed Forces. The KRG territory has a homogeneous Kurdish population; the Arab, Turkmen, and Christian enclaves have been reduced and therefore do not disrupt its unity. As in the rest of Iraq, more than 70% of its territory is urbanized. Erbil, the capital, Sulaymaniyah and Duhok are the main geographical poles. The KRG sits within the Zagros

Mountain foothills and reaches its highest point of 3,607m at Gundah Zhur, on the border with Iran. This rugged terrain has allowed the Kurds to resist assaults by the Iraqi army for decades. In 1991, the peshmerga came down from the scrubland to seize the towns and plains between Mosul and Kirkuk.



MAP 2: TERRITORIAL CONTROL IN NORTHERN IRAQ

After decades of fighting, interspersed with fleeting truces, Saddam Hussein decided to finish off the Kurds and launched a full-blown genocidal policy against them: the Anfal Campaign in 1988. Two thousand villages were destroyed and the population was rounded up into camps under the surveillance of the Iraqi military. The surrounding countryside was declared a “free killing zone” and anyone found outside of the camps could be immediately killed. The Anfal Campaign claimed 182,000 victims in all. Saddam Hussein’s goal was simply to destroy the Kurdish people and their territory in Iraq to the point that we can consider the Anfal Campaign a genocide. Hundreds of thousands of Kurds were transferred to Southern Iraq while Arabs from the south were invited to take their places in Mosul and Kirkuk. In 1988, Saddam Hussein ordered a chemical attack on the Kurdish village of Halabja, causing 5,000 deaths. This massacre led to a massive exodus of the Kurdish population to Iran and Turkey. The Anfal Campaign convinced the Kurds that only broad autonomy, or even independence, could guarantee their security.

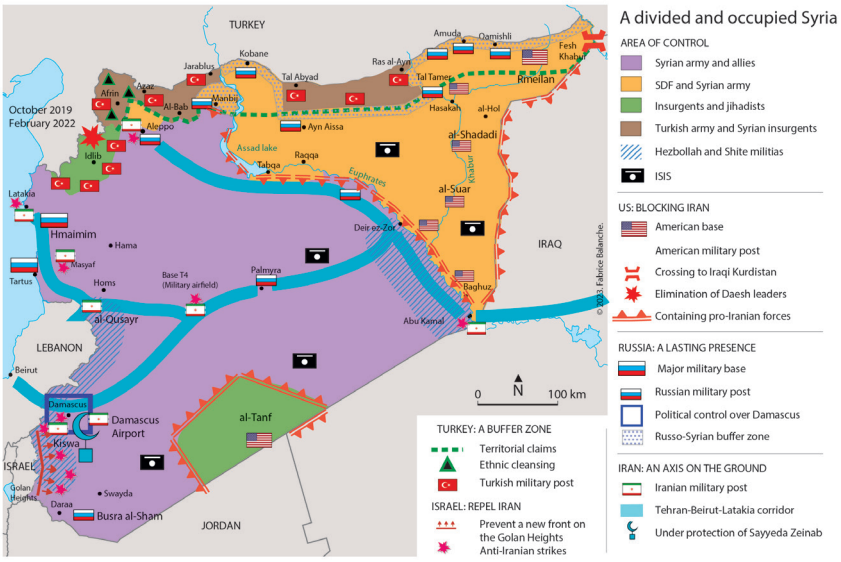
From 1991 until 2003, the Kurdish territory lived under the protection of Western air power, though it suffered the effects of the international embargo just as much as the rest of Iraq. The borders with Iran and Turkey were practically closed which prevented them from obtaining supplies from abroad, while Saddam Hussein’s Iraq traded with Syria. Against a backdrop of poverty, a violent civil war broke out between the KDP and the PUK between 1994 and 1997, causing 5,000 to 8,000 deaths. This intra-Kurdish war left its mark on the KRG and still contributes to undermining its political unity with Baghdad. In 2003, Kurdish forces joined with the American military to overthrow Saddam Hussein. This allowed them to expand their territory and obtain an autonomous status in the 2004 Iraqi constitution. The Kurdish provinces and disputed territories have 64 deputies in the Iraqi parliament (out of 329 deputies) that are often essential to forming majorities, and it is traditional for the President

of the Republic to be Kurdish. Last but not least, the KRG is supposed to receive 17% of the Iraqi budget from the federal government. As a result, from 2004 to 2014, the KRG experienced prodigious economic development while the rest of Iraq descended into civil war. Its model for development is the Gulf petro-monarchies.

The direct exploitation of petroleum resources, which are exported in part to Turkey, guarantees a comfortable level of revenue for the KRG, allowing it to become more independent of Baghdad. Political stability and security make the KRG attractive to businesses wishing to operate in Iraq. Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and Duhok enjoy a robust real estate market thanks to investments from all over Iraq. Indeed, the security, quality of services, and the relative moral freedoms are attracting the Iraqi middle and upper classes who are purchasing property for their holidays. There are also refugees from Mosul and Kirkuk, whether Kurds, Christians, or Arabs, who have come to seek a safe haven in Kurdistan. In Duhok, nearly a third of the population is now made up of Arabs from Mosul who arrived when that city was taken by Daesh and who prefer to remain in Kurdistan. As for the Christians who came from Mosul, they now reside in the Ain Kawa district (100,000 inhabitants) and no longer intend to return to Mosul. The influx of this new, non-Kurdish population is not perceived as a problem by the KRG. On the contrary, it has contributed to the region's economic prosperity without influencing political choices because they continue to vote in their home province. In the event of a new referendum on Kurdistan's independence, they would not be an obstacle.

1.2 Syrian Kurdistan's autonomy is recent and uncertain

The geography, demographics, and development of Syrian Kurdistan is very different from Iraq. It is not situated among high mountains that are conducive to resistance and which preserve Kurdish identity. The Afrin Region is the more rugged with its hilly landscape, but the mountains there do not exceed 1,000 meters of altitude. Most of the Kurdish territory covers the small hills around Kobanî and, above all, the vast plains in Jazira. Between these three zones with a homogenous Kurdish population, the majority of the population is Arab. Unlike Iraq, this is therefore not a vast, homogenous Kurdish territory. In the Euphrates Valley, the Kurdish population is limited to a few districts in Raqqa, where, in the 1960s, rural populations came to settle in this mushrooming city. Qamishli and Al Hasakah, the two largest cities of the Jazira region, are divided into Kurdish and Arab districts. The former are a majority in Qamishli but a minority in Al Hasakah. In 2011, the total Kurdish population in Syria was estimated at 2 million out of 21 million inhabitants. Half were located in their home territories and the other half were in Aleppo and Damascus. The Kurdish neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsoud in Aleppo alone was home to more than half a million Kurds, a result of the rural exodus from Afrin and Kobanî. In the territory that now makes up the AANES, the Kurdish population is estimated at more than a million inhabitants while Sunni Arabs number 1.5 to 2 million, half a million of whom are displaced from the government zone. Christians (Assyrians, Syriacs and Armenians) only number in the tens of thousands. According to church authorities, more than three quarters of these Christians have fled the region since 2011.



MAP 3: DIVIDED AND OCCUPIED SYRIA

Under the Ba'athist regime, Syrian Kurds were victims of discrimination but they were not subject to a genocidal policy as in Iraq under Saddam Hussein. In fact, the worst measure taken against the Kurds dates back to 1961, when Syria was ruled by a nationalist government. At that time, tens of thousands of Kurds were stripped of their Syrian nationality, becoming foreigners in their own country: the «bedoon» (without nationality). They were granted permanent residence permits but could not purchase property or obtain a degree, nor could they enter university. These bedoon could not leave the Hasakah province without police authorization. They would have to wait until 2011 and the uprising in Syria for Bashar al-Assad to restore Syrian nationality to the bedoon of 1961 and their descendants, nearly 300,000 people in total.[2] In Northeastern Syria, Kurds were largely excluded from the land reform of the 1960s, as it was not implemented in Hasakah province in order to prevent a small Kurdish landowning class from being established. Land was confiscated from large landowners, as in the rest of the country, but then leased by the government to those same large landowners, tribal chiefs, and urban bourgeoisie if they were loyal to the Ba'athist regime. The Syrian regime's goal was to keep Kurdish territories underdeveloped so that this population would leave the rural and border regions for large cities in order for them to become more Arab and lose ties to their home territory.

The Ba'athist regime did not have to face armed Kurdish resistance. Their dispersal throughout the country and their weak numbers made it difficult for a powerful Kurdish nationalist movement to emerge as it had in Iraq. Furthermore, starting in 1980, the Ba'athist regime welcomed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan and his military organization into its territory. The Kurdish leader had full freedom to destabilize Turkey, but he had to refrain from any political activity in Syria. Syrian Kurds were authorized to join the ranks of the

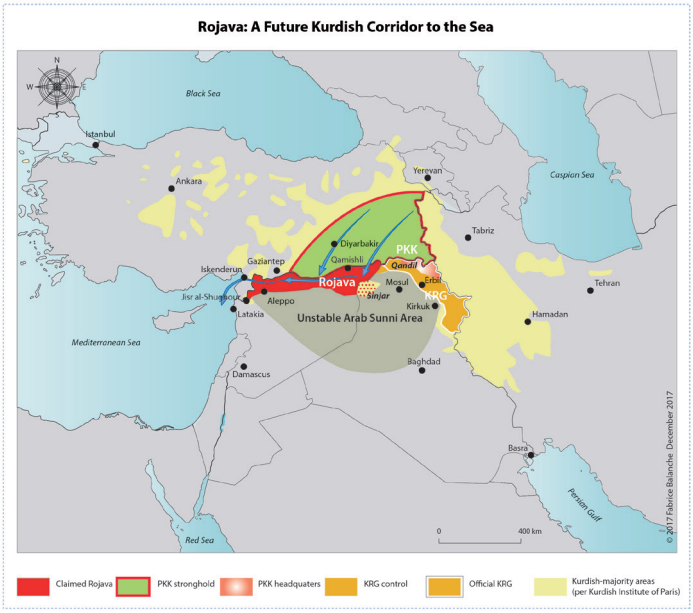
2 — Roussel, Cyril. « La construction d'un territoire kurde en Syrie : un processus en cours «, Maghreb - Machrek, vol. 213, no. 3, 2012, pp. 83-98.

PKK and fight in Turkey. Among them, we can note the current AANES leaders Ilham Ahmad, Mazloum Abdi (known as «Kobanî»), and the hundreds of «cadro» (officers or cadres) who came in 2012 from the Qandil Mountains in Iraq to organize the YPG. In 1998, under pressure from Turkey, Hafez al-Assad had to expel Ocalan and the PKK from Syria. He would thereby lose an asset for controlling Syrian Kurds. In 2004, riots broke out in Qamishli and spread to all Kurdish areas of Syria,[3] including the Kurdish neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsoud in Aleppo. However, the Arab population showed no anti-regime solidarity with the Kurds, who were violently repressed. In the northeast, Arab tribes such as the Tayy, armed by the Syrian regime, participated in the crackdown. Kurdish stores in Qamishli and Hasakah were looted and thousands of families were expelled from their homes by Arab neighbors who seized their property. This explains why the Kurds immediately split from the Syrian opposition in 2011.

The PYD, founded in 2003 by former PKK members and supporters, was strengthened in 2012 by the arrival of PKK fighters and the creation of the YPG. A civil war broke out within the Kurdish community between the YPG and militias that were independent or linked to the Syrian KDP, which was the most powerful Kurdish political movement in 2011. By 2013, all other Kurdish militias had been defeated or expelled to Iraqi Kurdistan. The PKK, through its local organizations, the PYD and the YPG, reigned supreme in Rojava. The goal was to unify the Kurdish territories and install a governance model based on Ocalan's ideology. However, attempts to expand beyond the Kurdish territories were unsuccessful until the United States supported the YPG in the fight against Daesh in the autumn of 2014. Bolstered by the International Coalition's support, the YPG recaptured Kobanî from Daesh and managed to drive them from the entire area of the Turkey-Syria border between the Euphrates and Iraq. In July 2016, the YPG captured the city of Manbij and made the decision to join with Afrin with the official aim of blocking the road between Turkey and Raqqa in order for the International Coalition to support them in this operation. In fact, Raqqa was only a pretext; the true objective was indeed to unite all the Kurdish territories of Northern Syria.[4] This led to Turkey's direct military intervention in Syria and its closer ties to Russia in August 2016. Officially, Turkey also had the elimination of Daesh and the liberation of Raqqa as its objective, but in reality, it was the destruction of the Syrian Kurdish entity that motivated sending Turkish troops into Syria.

3 — Tejel, Jordi. "La nouvelle donne kurde au regard du passé", Études, vol. , no. 2, 2017, pp. 19-29.

4 — Balanche, Fabrice. "Rojava's Sustainability and the PKK's Regional Strategy", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 24 August 2016.



MAP 4: THE PKK STRATEGY IN SYRIA: A CORRIDOR TO THE SEA

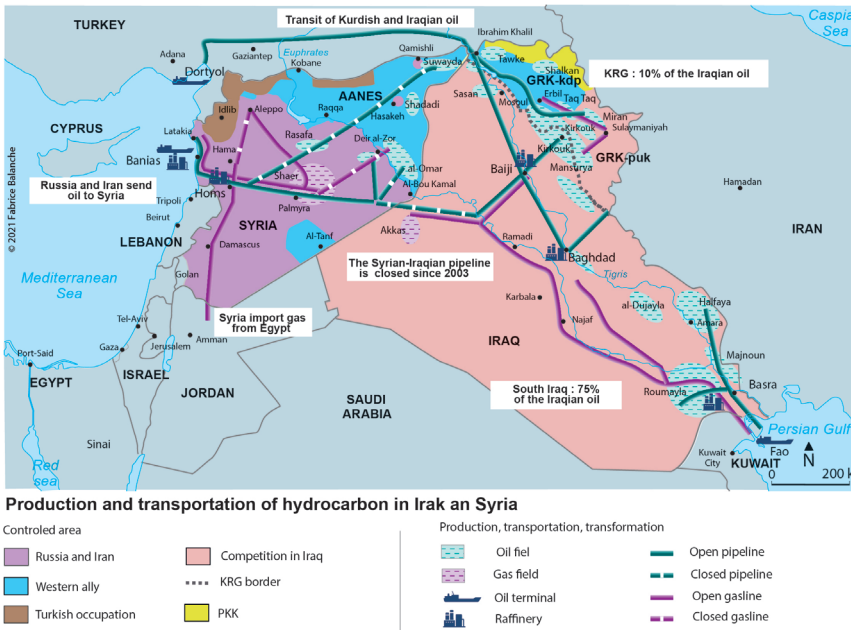
With the International Coalition's support, the YPG created an alliance with the various anti-Daesh Arab militias: the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The latter went on to liberate Raqqa in the autumn of 2017 and then the entire Northern Euphrates Valley until capturing Bāghūz, the last stronghold of Daesh, in March 2019. After several name changes, Rojava became the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria. This is divided into several administrative districts and is officially built on participatory democracy, the most basic level of which is the canton, a unit of about a thousand inhabitants. In reality, all of this is just a smokescreen to hide a centralized and authoritarian system, whose real leaders are hidden in shadow, but coming from the PKK.[5] The United States and Western countries are pretending to distinguish between the PKK and the YPG in order to protect Turkey, but nobody is fooled. The YPG is the backbone of the SDF and is essential to eliminating Daesh and preventing the Syrian army from regaining control of the Northeast. The United States is counting on the rise of a new generation of Kurdish leaders who are independent of the PKK, but this would require much more serious economic and political support and, above all, at least one to two decades of peace.

1.3 Economic prosperity east of the Tigris and lasting stagnation in the West

In economic terms, the situation in the AANES is far from being comparable to that of the KRG, and it does not seem possible for Syrian Kurdistan to reach the same level of development. Of course, the economic situation of the KRG in the 1990s was not much different from the situation in the AANES today. The international embargo on Iraq as well as Turkish, Iranian, and Iraqi hostilities created a situation that is worse than the current situation in Northeast Syria because humanitarian aid was much more limited. Indeed, the border with Turkey is closed, the Syrian regime levies prohibitive taxes on products bound for AANES and international sanctions against Syria also apply in part to it. For

5 — Balanche Fabrice, "From Qamishli to Qamishlo: A Trip to Rojava's New Capital", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 8 May 2017.

example, the European Union cannot finance reconstruction projects in the northeast as it refuses to finance the reconstruction of Syria until the Syrian regime agrees to a political transition plan in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Of course, there are exceptions to the rule and NGOs operating in the northeast have more leeway and financial means provided by Western donors than those in governmental Syria, but there is no question of launching a «Marshall Plan» in the AANES territory. This would require recognizing the AANES as a legitimate local government, but because of its links to the PKK and faced with fierce opposition from Turkey, neither the Europeans nor the United States will do so. The only official recognition of the AANES came from the Parliament of Catalonia in October 2021. But recognition is not enough; a Western army would have to be present to guarantee the region's autonomy. The American military presence, however, is temporary and Russia has no desire or interest in preserving the AANES.



MAP 5: HYDROCARBONS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

The AANES and the KRG both have oil deposits that could provide them with energy independence and export revenues. In fact, more than 80% of Syrian oil production is in AANES territory and 10% of Iraqi oil belongs to the KRG (if we exclude the Kirkuk fields now under federal Iraqi control). However, 80% of Syrian oil production is now less than 100,000 barrels per day due to a lack of maintenance (pre-war Syria produced 380,000 barrels per day). As for Iraq, its production has now reached 5 million barrels per day. Oil availability is therefore not the same and the prospects for increasing Syrian production are low given the current situation. Only through peace and massive investments in the sector could Syrian production be brought back to its pre-war level. The AANES must therefore not rely on an oil windfall to ensure its development. Moreover, if Iraq can give up 10% of its oil production to the KRG, there is no question of Syria allowing 80% of its oil to be in the hands of the AANES. Already, some of the oil produced in the northeast is being transferred to the Syrian regime. The AANES does not have any refining capacity other than small-scale refineries that produce poor-quality fuel and create incredible amounts of pollution. Plans to build a refinery in the northeast by a U.S. company, Delta Crescent, have failed. The Biden administration refused to renew the export license of this company, which is closely tied to the Republicans and which had been

charged with modernizing and exporting AANES oil production in 2018.

The production of raw agricultural materials is the second source of wealth for the AANES. Before the war, this region was considered Syria's breadbasket. Thanks to the Euphrates Valley's extensive irrigation system, abundant rainfall in Jazira, cheap fuel, and the intensive use of phosphate fertilizers, farmers produced enough to ensure Syria's food independence and to export large quantities in rainy years. However, this mode of production was obsolete and relied on massive state support and predatory use of water resources. Drought, the withholding of water by Turkey – which controls the short upstream sections of the Euphrates and the Baligh Rivers – , and Turkey's intensive extraction of water from aquifers north of the border are causing an unsolvable water shortage that can only be overcome through a drastic and costly reform of the agricultural production model. However, the AANES lacks both the technical and financial capacities to carry out this reform, even with the help of Western NGOs. The former breadbasket of Syria is now forced to import grain to feed its own population. Bread is made with a mixture of wheat and soy flour, which gives it an unpleasant taste. It is still subsidized, because without it the population could not even feed itself, but it is rationed.

Cotton was the region's second major agricultural resource, but this summer crop requires large amounts of water that are no longer available in most of the region. Only farmers who can draw directly from the Euphrates are guaranteed a crop. Irrigation by artesian wells is too costly in terms of fuel – when farmers can afford it – and most of the areas cultivating cotton depend on this type of irrigation. Except in the Euphrates Valley, cultivated areas have been significantly reduced and are now limited to winter crops using rainfall because summer irrigation is not feasible. The abandoning of cotton and other summer crops as well as the drop in cereal production has deprived the rural population of most of their income and made them increasingly dependent on international humanitarian aid.

The KRG and the AANES exist in two different temporal contexts. The former has managed to achieve nationally and internationally recognized autonomous status. The latter has only symbolic recognition from Western countries that are grateful to the SDF for their fight against Daesh, but as memories of the battles of Kobane (2014) and Raqqa (2017) fade, Western gratitude is waning and, with it, promises to guarantee Kurdish autonomy. As a result of peace, oil revenue, and liberal governance, the KRG has managed to build a prosperous economy, develop modern infrastructure and become an attractive territory for Iraqi and foreign investors. The standard of living of the KRG's population is that of a middle-income country (around $5,000 per capita/year in 2022), and the poverty rate in the Kurdish provinces is the lowest in Iraq, at less than 10% in 2020. On the other hand, the economic situation in Northeast Syria is abysmal, with a GDP comparable to that of the Least Developed Countries at $500 per capita. The level of poverty is staggering and there are no statistics to describe the daily life of the population of the AANES.

We will not dwell on the differences in governance between the KRG and the AANES. Neither system can be considered democratic by Western standards. However, by regional standards we can consider the governance of the KRG and the AANES to be the most liberal in both countries. Although KRG elections

are marred by political cronyism, they have the merit of existing and, even if they do not allow for political turnover, the opposition is represented. The government is concerned with economic development and is doing everything possible to attract outside investment, which implies rule of law. Independent media exists and is not worried when it criticizes the regional government. The situation in the AANES is more complex because we have never had elections. They have been systematically postponed due to the conflict. Power is controlled by the YPG and its political branches (PYD and CDS), which are closely, but discreetly, linked to the PKK, no matter what political and military leaders say. Of course, since the euphoria of the victory in Raqqa and the promises of a brighter tomorrow, the YPG has watered down its ideology. There is no longer any talk of abolishing money in favor of barter or even of collectivizing land. Polygamy is no longer outlawed in Arab areas. The reality of political control and economic difficulties has made Kurdish leaders much more pragmatic, but the umbilical cord to the PKK has yet to be cut.
We are therefore facing two extremely different situations and political agendas regarding the AANES and the KRG. However, both have major concerns about their autonomy due to internal problems. The rivalry between the KDP and the PUK threatens its unity. The economic situation is not bad, but the fickle relationship with Baghdad is a concern. In Syria, the Arab population's growing opposition and the economic crisis are weakening the AANES. The population is overcome with great despair, including the Kurds who were traumatized by the loss of Afrin in 2018 and Ras al-Ayn in 2019. In both Iraq and Syria, the Kurdish autonomous regions are also threatened by geopolitical developments that are unfavorable to the West.

2. Regional governments and empires are allied against the Kurds

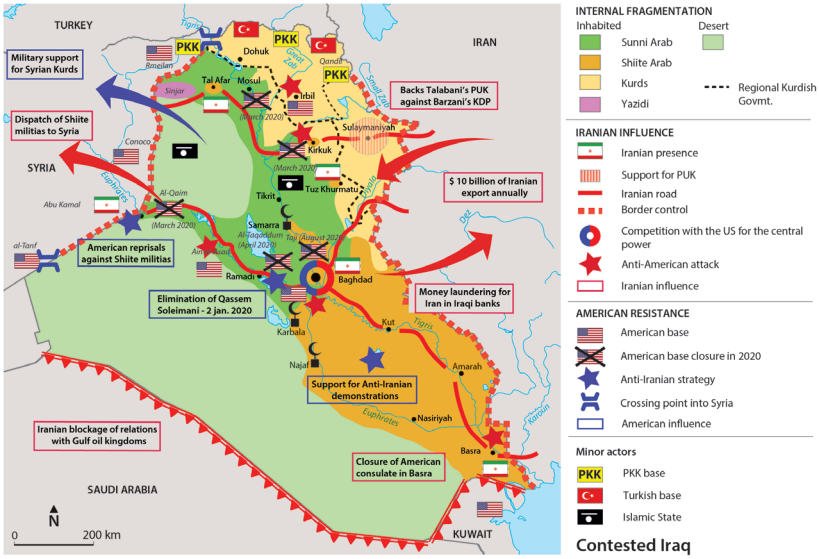
The threats to Kurdish autonomous regions come from both the rebuilding of central governments and the regional geopolitics shaped by American disengagement. Neither Turkey nor Iran wants to see Syria and Iraq once again become powerful countries, but they also have no interest in seeing the Kurds take advantage of this fragility to build autonomous local governments, or even independent ones in the long term. Turkey supports Masoud Barzani's KDP and therefore the autonomy of the KRG and the fragmentation of Iraq. Iran supports the Talabani family's PUK, as this allows it to weaken the KRG. Iran maintains ambiguous relations with the PKK. On the one hand it is a tool that can be used against Turkey and the KDP, but the PKK in Syria, relying on the American presence to control the Northeast, poses a problem for Iran. As for Turkey, an ally of the United States within NATO, it has grown closer to Russia and Iran in Syria specifically in order to fight against the PKK. All three countries have a shared interest in seeing the United States leave the region in order to extend their influence, but they do not agree on the division of territory. This disagreement and the continued American military presence have allowed Kurdish autonomies to survive up to now.

Western media has focused on the difficulties facing the AANES, the attacks by Daesh in Syria and the Turkish bombing, as well as the Syrian regime's vindictive attitude, but they forget that the KRG is also threatened by Baghdad, the pro-Iranian Shiite militias, and Iran itself. The PKK has better communication channels in the West than in the KRG. The «Rojava revolution» is more of a dream in Europe than the Dubai-style development of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. Young Kurdish women fighters in fatigues, smiling as they carry their Kalashnikovs,

are more often on the cover of magazines than the American University of Duhok students in tight jeans glued to their latest iPhone. While the methods used to curtail the autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan are less bloody than those used against Syrian Kurdistan, the will to put an end to the KRG is just as present.

2.1 The slow but determined suffocation of Iraqi Kurdistan by Baghdad

In 2018, following the referendum on the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, Shiite militias drove the KDP and PUK peshmerga out of most of the disputed territories, especially the oil-rich region of Kirkuk (15% of Iraq's oil). The return of Kirkuk to federal government control deprives the KRG of an essential economic resource to free itself from Baghdad's financial control. In 2014, due to the fall in oil prices, the direct exploitation of new oil fields by the KRG, and the desire of the Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, to centralize the country, the federal government interrupted financial transfers to the KRG, even though the Iraqi Constitution stipulates that it should receive 17% of the federal budget. This share is greater than the population living in the KRG, but it is also to compensate the Kurds for the genocide committed against them by the Baathist regime. The sale of oil from Kirkuk by the Kurdish forces between 2014 and 2017 made up for some of the shortfall, but then the KRG was plunged into a serious financial crisis that it only emerged from in 2021. The streamlining of public finances and the return of transfers from Baghdad made it possible to pay the KRG's employees in full again. However, once the 2021 parliamentary elections were over, the transfers were once again irregular and incomplete in 2022. Kurdish Prime Minister Masrour Barzani visited Baghdad in January 2023 to try to reach a lasting agreement with Prime Minister Mohamed Shia al-Soudani, but to no avail.



MAP 6: IRAQ'S LACK OF SOVEREIGNTY

The management of hydrocarbons is the other major point of disagreement between Erbil and Baghdad. Since 2004, the KRG has offered oil concessions to foreign companies in order to develop its own production. It then built a pipeline to export it directly via Turkey. Baghdad refuses to accept this and claims that hydrocarbons are exclusively the responsibility of the federal government, which the KRG disputes. Iraq does not have any natural resource laws, unlike the KRG, which enacted a law in 2007 allowing it to exploit and export hydrocarbons within its territory. In February 2022, the Iraqi Supreme Court declared this law unconstitutional and all contracts signed by the KRG

with foreign companies as illegal. The KRG has protested, arguing that there is no law on natural resources in Iraq and that the Supreme Court's ruling is therefore abusive because it is unfounded. A legal battle between Baghdad and Erbil has begun, but it has little chance of reaching a decision accepted by both parties because in this context, the law of the strongest prevails. Baghdad is putting pressure on oil companies to withdraw from Kurdistan if they wish to gain access to the rich oil fields in the south and in Kirkuk. This is why Total Energie sold its shares in Kurdistan, a prerequisite for a lucrative contract in southern Iraq estimated at $25 billion, but to date nothing has been signed. Difficulties have been piling up and Total Energie could very well see this contract fall apart. The Chinese and Russian companies operating in Kurdistan and Iraq are less subject to this type of blackmail by Baghdad, as they are supported by Iran. They are also willing to take more risks than Western companies because of the American sanctions that punish companies working with subcontractors with ties to Iran. The standoff between Baghdad and Erbil could end with the federal army or pro-Iranian militias taking control of the Iraqi-Turkish border, as was the case in Kirkuk in 2018. It is also possible to imagine a barrage of missiles on Kurdish oil and gas installations fired by pro-Iranian Shiite militias on orders from Tehran.

The other way for Baghdad to roll back Kurdish autonomy is to foster division between the PUK and the KDP. The PUK was destabilized by succession disputes after Jalal Talabani's stroke in 2012 and then his death in 2017. His wife acted as regent, trying to keep the party united until Bafel Talabani was old enough to take the reins of power in Sulaymaniyah. But in order to do this he had to eliminate rivals, such as the former mayor of Kirkuk, Najmiddin Karim, who went into exile in the United States in 2018, and particularly his cousin Lahour, the former head of the PUK's intelligence services, who is very hostile to any collaboration with the KDP. Finally, within the PUK, the dynastic succession is contested. It should be remembered that the PUK was originally born out of opposition within the KDP to the Barzani family's control of the party. As a result, there was no question of reproducing the same model within the PUK. This led some PUK members to create a new party, the Gorran, founded by Nawshirwan Mustafa in 2009. However, this party failed to present a sustainable alternative and lost its representation in the Iraqi parliament in the 2021 elections. A new political party emerged in 2017 in Sulaymaniyah, «New Generation'', which brings together those who have been disappointed by the PUK and Gorran. In the 2021 parliamentary elections, New Generation won the city of Sulaymaniyah over the PUK. The KDP, on the other hand, fared much better and now has twice as many members in the Iraqi parliament (34 seats) as the PUK (15 seats) thanks to its deep roots in Dohuk and Erbil. Masoud Barzani's party therefore has a strong position in the Iraqi parliament and in the KRG. In terms of development, Erbil has also overtaken Sulaymaniyah.

In 2003, Sulaymaniyah and Erbil were of comparable size with about half a million inhabitants. Twenty years later, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan has become significantly larger, with 1.5 million inhabitants, compared with one million for Sulaymaniyah. Erbil's international airport is dynamic, while Sulaymaniyah is languishing. NGOs, diplomatic representations, and foreign companies are settling in Erbil. The Sulaymaniyah region is much less rich in oil, which deprives the PUK of revenue that could be recycled into the real estate market as in Erbil. The customs duties generated by border crossings with Iran are less lucrative than Ibrahim Khalil's with Turkey and Faysh Khabur 's with AANES,

controlled by the KDP. The loss of Kirkuk and its oil fields was an economic disaster for the PUK. The recently discovered gas fields north of Sulaymaniyah could revitalize the economy of the PUK area, though it will not be enough to catch up with Erbil. This marginalization creates resentment towards the KDP, even though both parties are supposed to co-manage the KRG. Baghdad is using this division to weaken the KRG. It is offering Sulaymaniyah a separate autonomous status that would allow it to receive its portion of the federal budget directly and without delay. But can the PUK believe Baghdad's promises? The central government's objective is for the KRG to disappear and be replaced by three Kurdish provinces (Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah),[6] which could have more autonomy than other Iraqi provinces, but which would be less resistant to the central government. This splintering of the KRG would make it possible for Baghdad to definitively eliminate the specter of Iraqi Kurdistan's independence.

2.2 Damascus is not conceding anything to the Kurds

Negotiations between Damascus and the AANES have been at a standstill since the Turkish offensive in October 2019. The Syrian government is demanding the outright reintegration of the AANES into its control and the dissolution of its institutions in favor of the Syrian administration. The militias that make up the SDF would be integrated into the Syrian army, but the SDF's unity would be broken. In exchange, the regime is promising general amnesty for all those who have worked with the AANES, recognition of diplomas issued to date, and the teaching of the Kurdish language as an option. These measures are of course considered highly insufficient by the AANES leaders who are demanding that they retain their autonomy, their governance, and the cohesion of the SDF. They are willing to let the Syrian flag fly next to the AANES flag and to share oil with the Syrian regime, as is already the case today, but they refuse to let the Syrian regime regain full control of this resource, which is essential to ensure their economic autonomy.

The two points of view are therefore very far apart, if not incompatible. This was not the case before the Turkish offensive of October 2019. At the time, Bashar al-Assad showed more openness towards the Kurds. He held out the prospect of a deal for them comparable to the one they had reached with the rebels in the south. With the help of Russian mediation, the rebels in the Deraa region had accepted the regime's return in July 2018 after a short battle and many guarantees. The Syrian army was not to return and let the ex-rebels police themselves. Former officials were to be reinstated, young men had 18 months to comply with their military requirements, some of them – as well as rebel militias – were integrated into the 5th corps of the Syrian army under Russian protection. Furthermore, the Russian military police were deployed in this area to ensure compliance with the agreements. But by the spring of 2019, the Syrian army was retaking direct control over all areas of the region manu militari; the promises of amnesty, military reprieve, and reinstatement of civil servants were not fulfilled, etc. Given these conditions, it goes without saying that the leaders of the AANES could legitimately doubt the good faith

6 — The KRG officially has 4 provinces including Halabja, which was founded in 2012 by the KRG, but the Iraqi parliament has refused to officially recognize it.

of Damascus, which did not encourage them to negotiate, especially since the glorious victory over Daesh in Baghuz in March 2019, they believed they could count on the unwavering support of the West.

On October 6, 2019, Donald Trump ordered U.S. troops to withdraw from the Syrian-Turkish border between Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ayn. The next day, the Turkish army and its Syrian proxies launched the assault against the SDF. American troops were ordered to completely withdraw from the AANES. France objected to the Turkish offensive but did nothing to oppose it and the 450 French soldiers who were present followed the Americans to Iraq. The SDF was unable to resist the Turkish army, its artillery, and its air force. In the rear, Daesh cells began to come out of the woodwork and organize attacks. This forces Mazloum Kobani to negotiate with Russia on the return of the Syrian army and the deployment of Russian troops at the borders and front lines with Turkey in order to avoid the total destruction of the AANES. According to these agreements, the SDF was to be integrated into the Syrian army in the short term. But in the end, the United States decided not to completely evacuate Northeastern Syria, which allowed Mazloum Kobani to stall Russia and Damascus. Since that time, the situation has not changed, but the Syrian regime now refuses any concessions of autonomy to the AANES, convinced that it will have no choice but to return unconditionally to the Syrian state or be destroyed by Turkey in a future offensive. The American presence is essential to the survival of the AANES, and everything depends on the willingness of the United States to remain in northeastern Syria. Damascus, Tehran, and Moscow are convinced that this is only temporary. The Russian delegations before Mazloum Kobani that have followed since November 2022 ask him to apply the October 2019 agreement if he does not want Turkey to launch a new assault.

Damascus feels that it is in a position of strength in relation to the AANES, especially as it knows its domestic weaknesses well. The region's economic problems could be exacerbated by Damascus blocking, for example, UN humanitarian aid that must now pass through its territory. In July 2020, in the UN Security Council, Russia vetoed cross-border aid to the AANES. The Syrian regime can also close «border» crossings between its territory and that of the AANES and/or impose prohibitive taxes on goods. If AANES does not deliver the oil it demands, the Syrian army isolates the Kurdish enclaves of Shahba, north of Aleppo, and Sheikh Maqsoud (the Kurdish quarter of Aleppo). Bashar al-Assad still maintains friendly ties with the Arab tribal chiefs of the AANES. He knows that they do not support Kurdish rule, but that they keep a low profile because they have military strength and financial resources. In each chiefdom, the youngest member of the family continues to maintain excellent relations with Damascus while the eldest has responsibilities within the AANES. This is the case of the Shammar tribe, whose Sheikh Hamidi[7] was vice-president of the Jazira canton and its militia, the Sanadid, which has worked closely with the YPG since 2013. However, his brother still resides in the government district of Qamishli with his guard. He maintains the best of relationships with the Syrian security services, proudly displaying the portrait of Bashar al-Assad in his living

7 — Died in 2022.

room.[8] There is no animosity between the two brothers, simply a sharing of roles in order to always be on the winning side: a tribe only acts in its own interest. Their loyalty to the YPG is transactional and temporary, because even the Shammar cannot accept an autonomous Kurdish region.

For all of these reasons, both internal and external, negotiations with Damascus are at a standstill. The Kurds do not trust the Syrian regime either. They cannot hope to become its ally and retain their autonomy because Bashar al-Assad will again turn to the Arab tribes to the detriment of the Kurds, as before the civil war. For example, the Tayy tribe in the Qamishli region has remained staunchly pro-regime, its territory an enclave of the Syrian army within the AANES. The tribe is armed by the regime and refuses to let the SDF enter its territory. Prior to 2011, the Tayy had a virtual monopoly on smuggling to and from Turkey, thanks to the tolerance of the Syrian authorities. In exchange, they rendered services such as suppressing the Kurdish revolt in 2004. We see similar situations in Deir ez-Zor, Manbij, Hasakah, and Raqqa with other tribes dreaming of regaining their pre-war superiority and the accompanying benefits such as the exploitation of state lands, privileged employment in the civil service, etc. As a result, the Kurds know that the only way to guarantee their freedom and property is to maintain their own military organization.

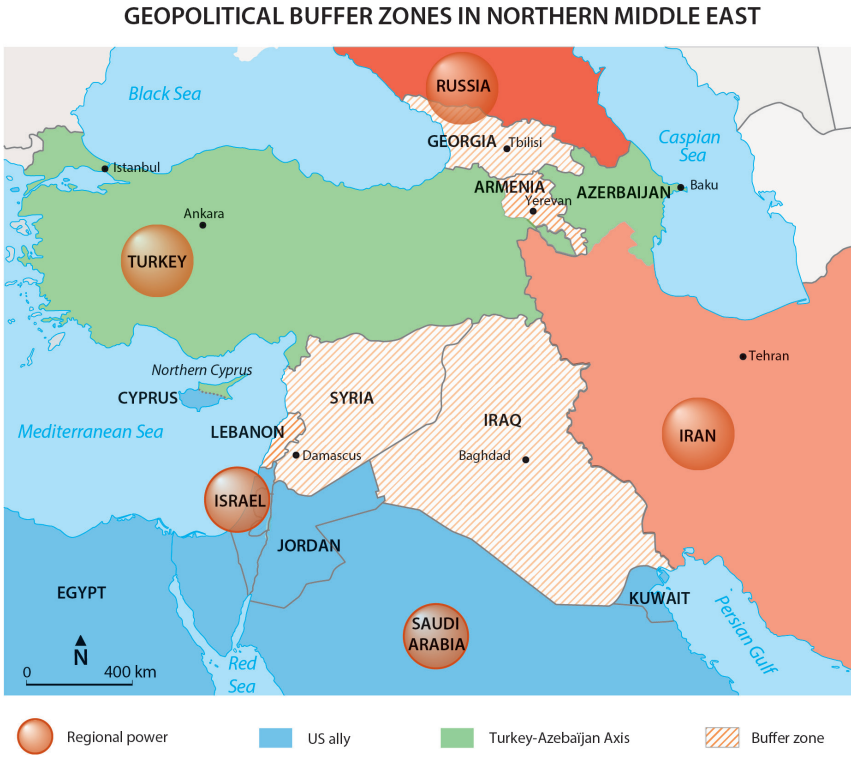
In the Syrian case, just as in the Iraqi case, as soon as the central government regains a certain stability, it tries to suppress local autonomous areas, especially when it comes to the Kurds. Arab nationalism is regaining its strength. This is an excellent way to bring together Syrians and Iraqis of all sects, divided by a violent civil war between communities, making the Kurds the enemy within. It is important to remember that this is the basis of the Ba'athist ideology as defined by Michel Aflaq and his friends. These young Christian and Alawite ideologists saw that sectarian divisions were dividing the Arabs and allowing colonialism to dominate the country. It was therefore necessary to find an ideology that would bring them all together and guarantee the non-Sunni minorities in Syria that they would not be plunged back into dhimmitude (submission). In Iraq, the ruling Sunni Arab minority needed an ideological smokescreen to dominate a country with a Shiite majority. Ba'athism united the Arabs but excluded the Kurds from the national community. This anti-Kurdish racism is deeply rooted in people's mindset. This explains why we do not have an alliance between the Alawites and the Kurds in Syria, despite their mutual distrust of the Sunni Arab majority. On the contrary, the regime is attempting to unite the different communities by accusing the Kurds of being the cause of all Syria's misfortunes: they steal grain, oil, electricity from dams, etc. In Iraq, the Sunni Arabs of Mosul blame the Kurds for the slow reconstruction of the city so that Erbil can continue its development. The Shiite population in Basra complains that it does not benefit from the profits of oil production, but instead of blaming the central government, it is the Kurds who are accused of diverting the oil windfall to themselves. From Mosul to Basra, the Kurds are regarded as the enemy within. Arab nationalism and state logic combine to deny any autonomy to the Kurds in Syria and Iraq. The same arguments are used by Recep Tayep Erdogan to unite the Turkish population in hopes of winning

8 — I visited him in March of 2017.

the presidential elections in May 2023. As for Iran, it is accusing the Kurds of separatism in an attempt to overcome its current crisis by playing on the opposition between Persians and ethnic minorities. This explains the simultaneous anti-Kurdish attacks by Iran and Turkey, even though their imperial logic regarding the region should be in favor of Kurdish autonomy in Syria and Iraq.

2.3 Syrian and Iraqi Kurds are at the center of a geopolitical buffer zone

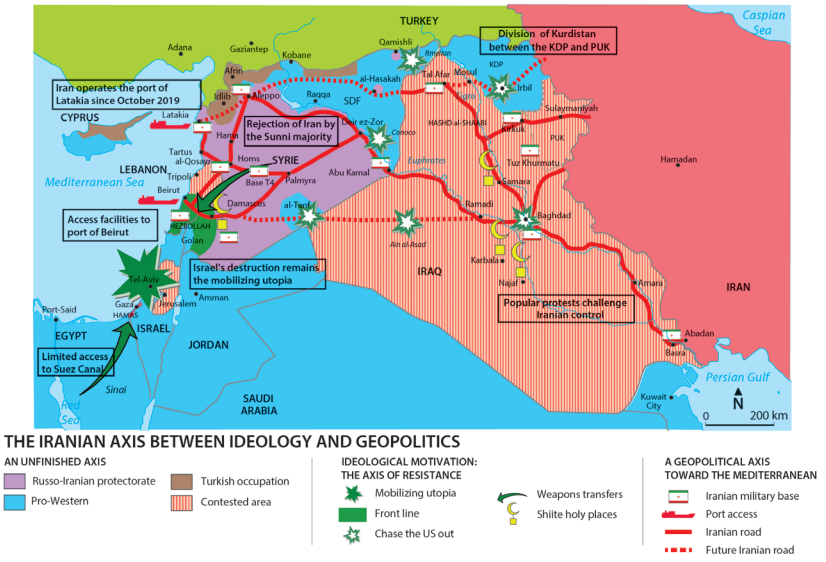
Syria, Lebanon and Iraq are now a geopolitical buffer zone subject to the influence of their powerful neighbors Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, but they are also the epicenter of the new global arc of crises between the West, led by the United States, and the Eurasian pair of Russia and China. At the regional level, Iran and Turkey are reviving their imperial aspirations. In the South, Israel and Saudi Arabia are content with a defensive position with regard to this space, which is largely dominated by their enemies. As for the United States,



MAP 7: THE LEVANT AND THE CAUCASUS: GEOPOLITICAL BUFFER ZONES

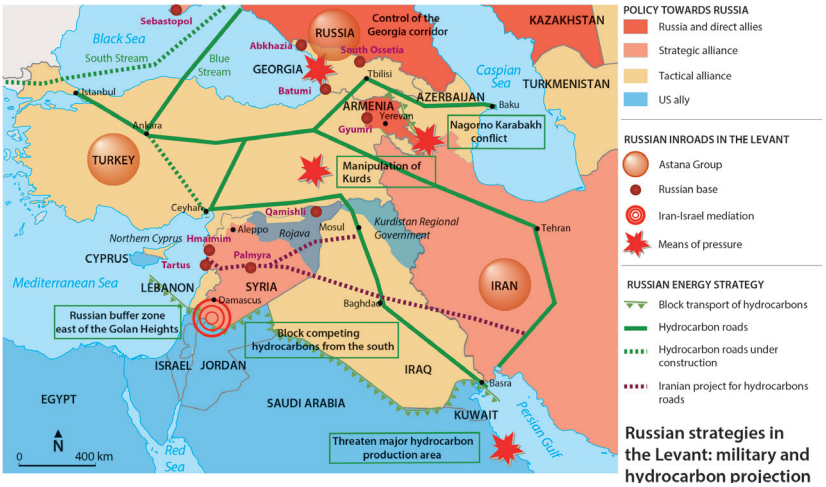
In contemporary Middle Eastern history, the United States is a newcomer. The Quincy Pact of 1945 marked the beginning of its intervention in the region and the withdrawal of Iraq and the beginning of its decline. The European powers – France and Great Britain – were no longer very important. The defense of the Indian route and the French lake strategy were no longer relevant. In contrast, Russia, Turkey, and Iran continued their age-old expansion despite regime changes. Putin's Russia is returning to the policy of the USSR, which was that of the Tsarist Empire: the descent towards the warm seas, in this case the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey wishes to recreate the Ottoman Empire, at least through political and economic influence, if not through the annexation of Arab territories. The fight against the PKK serves as a pretext to justify its bases and military operations in Syria and Iraq. As for Iran, it still wants to protect its Western border by conquering the other side of the Zagros Mountains all the way to the Mediterranean. It relies on Shiite and related communities,

such as the Alawites in Syria and the Shabaks in Iraq. The Islamic republic has also added an ideological objective: the destruction of Israel to justify the construction of this «axis of resistance»[9] (Iraqi Shiite militias, Alawite regime in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon).



MAP 8: THE IRANIAN AXIS BETWEEN IDEOLOGY AND GEOPOLITICS

The Iranian axis intersects with the Russian strategy. That is why the two countries are working together very effectively in Syria. The Russian-Iranian alliance upsets Turkish plans, but the three powers have shown themselves to be pragmatic in the context of the Astana conference. Turkey gets its share at the expense of the Kurds, Syria, and Iraq, as long as it does not interfere with Russian or Iranian plans. The United States is putting up resistance, Israel is trying to push the Iranians as far away from its border as possible through air strikes but also by negotiating with Russia, while Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are making more of an effort to use financial soft power to prevent Syria and Iraq from falling completely into Iran's influence. This geopolitical confrontation perpetuates the territorial fragmentation that resulted from the civil wars. The imperial mindset is opposed to rebuilding central governments. In theory, this geopolitical configuration could be favorable to preserving Kurdish autonomy. However, the opposite is happening.



MAP 9: RUSSIAN STRATEGY IN THE LEVANT

9 — Balanche, Fabrice, "From the Iranian Corridor to the Shia Crescent", Hoover Institution Press, 17 August 2018.

In Syria, the Kurds find themselves between the Turkish hammer and the Syrian anvil. The survival of the AANES depends on Western economic support and American military presence. The alignment of Bashar al-Assad's Syria and Erdogan's Turkey under Russia's guidance will lead to a joint operation against the AANES. This is unless Mazloum Kobani accepts the Russian-Syrian diktat. The United States is encouraging him to resist, but can it protect its allies from a Turkish offensive? The American priority is to do everything to keep Turkey in the NATO camp against the background of the war in Ukraine. But in this equation, the fate of the Kurdish populations of Northern Syria hardly matters. Russia is quick to remind the Kurds of the precedents set in Afrin and Ras al-Ayn to explain to the Kurds that they can expect nothing more from the West. As a result, they must seize the hand that Russia has extended before Turkey launches its offensive. But can the Syrian Kurds place more trust in Russia? It seems that Russia has an interest in the preservation of a Kurdish entity that threatens Turkey, which is an excellent way to force it to maintain good relations with Turkey. It must be recalled that it was the Kurdish threat that caused Turkey to switch sides in August 2016, allowing for the success of the Russian intervention in Syria, which culminated in the full recapture of Aleppo in December 2016. Admittedly, the Kurds matter as little to Russia as they do to the United States in light of the Ukrainian conflict; but the foreign policy of a dictatorship is more consistent than that of a democracy. The Kurds have had this bitter experience with Donald Trump.

The Iraqi Kurds are not without concerns about U.S. support. Despite fighting Daesh in Northern Iraq, the U.S. did not support the independence referendum in 2017. The following year, it allowed Iraqi Shiite militias, led by Qasem Soleimani, to seize Kirkuk and drive the peshmerga out of most of the «disputed territories». The militiamen were nevertheless blocked when they attempted to seize Faysh Khabur, the border post with Syria, and that of Ibrahim Khalil with Turkey, which would have resulted in the KRG being completely surrounded, but would also have deprived the United States of access to Northeast Syria by land. This episode left a bitter taste in the mouths of the Kurdish leaders in Erbil who are dubious about American protection in the event of a new assault by pro-Iranians. They have therefore diversified their allies, granting a major oil concession to the Russian company Lukoil in 2019 and real estate projects to China. But it is above all Erdogan's Turkey that Masoud Barzani is counting on in case of American absence. Turkey has many economic interests in Northern Iraq and the KDP is collaborating in the fight against the PKK. Finally, the Kurdish leaders are trying to appease the Islamic Republic by allowing Iranian goods to flow into the country without tax. They are silent with regard to the protest that began in September 2022 in Iran, along with the KRG's entire media.

Kurdish autonomous regions depend on American and Russian imperial strategies.

The future of the Kurdish autonomous regions is looking quite bleak. The AANES could simply disappear and the Kurdish population fall victim to ethnic cleansing. This is Turkey's objective, as it plans to settle Syrian refugees and displaced persons, both Sunni Arabs and Turkmen, in the 30-kilometer strip it is demanding south of its border. This process is already underway in Afrin, al-Bab and Ras al-Ayn. The next target is of course Kobanî, so that the linking of the al-Bab-Jarablus area with the Tel Abyad-Ras al-Ayn area can be achieved.

Furthermore, Kobanî is the symbol of Kurdish resistance to Daesh that Erdogan dreams of destroying in order to pander to the Turkish nationalism that is essential for his re-election in May 2023. The KRG's autonomy seems more secure, but it risks being undermined by joint action by Baghdad and Iran. The rivalry between the KDP and the PUK, which has been manipulated by Iran, could lead to the break-up of the autonomous region into two separate entities. The Sulaymaniyah region is under Iranian protectorate and receives its funding directly from Baghdad while the districts of Erbil and Dohuk would remain under KDP control, united or separated administratively, but under U.S.-Turkish protection.

The Iran and Turkey imperial strategies created vassalized autonomous entities on their periphery based on the Russian model (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Donbass, etc.), which allow them to weaken central governments, even if they are also under their domination, such as Georgia vis-à-vis Russia. Rivalry between the autonomous territory and the central government grants the guardian power the role of referee, which reinforces its domination. In this configuration, Syria and Iraq keep their borders but have to accept de facto local autonomy, provided that it is favorable to the neighboring empire. Unfortunately, the Kurdish autonomous regions do not enjoy the support of either Turkey nor Iran. Their salvation would instead come from the Russian and American Empires who need to maintain their presence in the Middle East and whose territory is not threatened by Kurdish irredentism, and who need them as strategic levers and logistical bases. In order to maintain their autonomy, the Kurds have no choice but to tie their fate primarily to American and Russian imperial strategies, to powers that have no friends but only interests and that will not be beholden to them in any way.